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Visualising Research in South Asia Beyond Pandemic Times

Reflections and Future Directions*

Researching in Pandemic Times – Mapping Initial Thoughts and Concerns

“Seeing, or the inability to see something, is political. In a world which has tried to make all things visible, the natural history of viruses has been a history of visualisation fuelled primarily by fear,”¹ writes Sria Chatterjee, zooming into pandemic times where the coronavirus’ visibility “has been both panacea and political tool – depending on who does it – and processes of visualisation are implicated in forms of care as much as they are in political violence, surveillance, xenophobia and institutional racism.”² One key aim of research is to produce knowledge and claims about what is unknown, unheard, invisible, about what needs (re)consideration or a particular kind of understanding. It is about problematising, modelling and presenting some kind of temporal certainty of insight (or “expertise”). Research knowledge is not only about “seeing,” but also about scale and cognitive radars or compasses. So, what do you see, or think you see when producing knowledge, when engaging in research in pandemic times? Where do you look, how, why, with whom, or shall we say for whom? What does it mean for future scholarly quests in terms of epistemic, methodological and ethical practices? When is the pandemic over, and is there such a thing as a post-pandemic era? What are the snapshots of these pandemic times? How do they inform

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1 Chatterjee 2020.

2 Ibid.

where you are heading next as a scholar? Where do you not dare to look, and why? What have you stepped away from? What have you stepped into without hesitating for the blink of an eye? These are some of the questions that have been on our minds since March 2020 when the World Health Organisation declared the rapid spread of infections caused by the Covid-19 virus a pandemic. In this article, we discuss three issues that we consider critical for future knowledge-production endeavours that deploy a decentred, decolonial approach to research praxis. In connecting these points to the pandemic, we also partake in telling the story of the pandemic. The first issue relates to establishing protected workspaces for scholars. We then ask how to re-think the aims and objectives of knowledge production and research practices in the context of slow science and the ethics of care. The third issue we flag pertains to the ethics and modalities of research collaborations, particularly between global north and global south contexts. Neither issue is new or exclusively connected to the pandemic, but the pandemic has highlighted the necessity and urgency of re-considering and engaging with them.

We base our mapping on our own research experiences, participation in a number of conferences, events and research projects related to decolonial practice, and research during the pandemic as well as an extensive literature review, and conversations among the working group *Researching in Times of a Pandemic*, with a focus on South Asia. In the following section, we elaborate on our own journeys, the working group and then end the first section with further elaborations on research during and beyond the pandemic. We then discuss three spotlights: the creation of a protected workspace, practicing the ethics of care, and implementing research collaborations. In the last section, we contextualise the spotlights in the existing literature.

We, the co-authors of this article, have witnessed critical geopolitical events from sometimes different, sometimes joint, vantage points, given our own socio-spatial positioning.³ Between 2020 and mid-2022, we watched numerous regional and global ramifications of the pandemic unfold, knowing that they affected our identities, academic biographies and everyday realities. We had few, or only distant reference points to fathom how this pandemic would affect our professional and private lives because, like everyone else, we had simply never been in such a situation before. While it was clear early on that some people would be more affected than others, how these effects would play out was difficult to predict. In universities and research institutions, there was a rush to take

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teaching, events and research online. No longer able to meet in person, there was little space or time to discuss the smaller and larger issues that the pandemic was generating in our social and professional lives. A few months into the lockdowns, Andrea Fleschenberg and Sarah Holz noticed that the limited conversations we did have with colleagues and early career researchers converged on similar themes.⁴ We thus decided to form an informal working group focused on South Asia, primarily India and Pakistan, for those in our immediate circle whose work has been and continues to be affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and its manyfold (in-)direct mid- to long-term implications.

We set three overarching aims for the working group: (1) to create a space to explore and discuss the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on research and communities in South Asia; (2) to exchange and collect experiences as well as useful resources to support planning and conducting critical research in pandemic times and beyond; and (3) to establish a co-learning platform for critical knowledge production. Especially knowledge production with regard to research design and methods, sampling and ethical challenges attendant to engaging in research in pandemic times. Through exchange and dialogue, we hoped to create a sense of community that would leave us feeling less alone; a space for sharing and thinking together about contingency plans, alternative research approaches in epistemological, methodological and ethical terms and for providing care in these challenging times. The open-ended discussions helped us gain knowledge about members' everyday experiences of doing research in global south and global north contexts. These multi-centric experiences help us build shared frames of reference that allow each member of the working group to better grasp our colleagues' struggles, which can help to build more context-sensitive collaborations. With this approach, we speak to the overarching aims of the co²libri project.⁵

With these objectives in mind, we emailed early career researchers in our network to set up the first meeting of the working group in the summer of 2020. At this time, Salman Khan joined our faculty team to coordinate and mentor the working group. Before our first meeting, to help kick-start the discussion, we circulated a number of readings by authors who reflected critically on the pandemic.^{6 7} During the first meeting in autumn 2020, each participant briefly pre-

⁴ Fleschenberg and Holz 2021.

⁵ Batool et al. 2021.

⁶ Bisoka 2020; Das 2020; Hussain 2020.

⁷ We understand this article primarily as a contribution to experience-sharing, documenting research work in progress and providing a space for a much-needed reflexive process. We do not

sented the issues and questions they were currently grappling with. Based on these elaborations, we mapped salient issues and aspects that required further consideration, and compiled a collection of e-resources and open access material. Subsequently, we encouraged members of the working group to develop vignettes to document and illustrate their struggles. These were used to initiate and further our discussions, and to elicit feedback and peer support. Most working group members were at different stages of their PhD journeys and their respective contributions were like pieces in a puzzle that helped us to map (missed) opportunities, coping strategies, emotional challenges in terms of researcher's feelings and resilience against fast-approaching deadlines, limited and dried-up funding, as well as performance indicators and academic career trajectories that were unlikely to change.⁸

In the first phase of the working group meetings, between September 2020 and December 2021, the working group consisted of nine permanent members and a few others who joined occasionally. Six working group members have grown up in either India or Pakistan, moving to Germany or the UK for their studies. Three working group members were from either France or Germany and have lived in India or Pakistan for extended periods. With the exception of one person who is an independent researcher based in Pakistan, all working group members were affiliated with universities in Germany or the UK. One working group member was initially affiliated with a university in Pakistan and then moved to a German university in June 2021. All members work on social science topics related to India or Pakistan. Hence, most of us move between different settings. With the exception of the three co-authors of this chapter, the other working group members were early career scholars at various stages of acquiring a PhD or a MA degree. Beyond this, the gender, age, skin colour, ethnicity and level of education of working group members are diverse, as are the areas of interest, the people and communities we work with, as well as the effects of the pandemic on our communities and research.⁹

engage extensively with the existing and emerging broader state of the art related to the topics presented here. This is the subject of a separate contribution of two of the co-authors. See Fleschenberg and Holz 2021.

⁸ Batool et al. 2021.

⁹ In the first half of 2022, the second and final phase of the working group, we enlarged our geographic scope to South East Asia, with a particular concern for transregional questions. This phase is not included here because the description of the specificities of each locale/community is beyond the scope of this article. For more detailed discussions and experience-sharing, see the various contributions to the special section co-edited in *South Asia Chronicle* (2021) as well as Fleschenberg and Castillo 2022.

The convergence of variegated identity- and context-based factors creates opportunities and challenges that are specific to each person seeking to produce knowledge. A large corpus of literature explores and examines how the positionality of the researcher and the context and location of the study shape research practices.¹⁰ While our worries were diverse due to our unique positionalities, a number of concerns were quite similar. Disruptions ranged from travel restrictions to technological disconnects, delays in research activities, and questions of health and risk. These challenges could not be addressed by applying standard research ethics protocols. For many years, scholars have highlighted that those who work in countries of the global south and global south scholars who work in the global north often face challenges that diverge from ‘standard’ ethics and research practice protocols. The pandemic has once again highlighted that established protocols are no longer adequate in either the global south and the global north. Apart from re-thinking them in general, a differentiated approach is necessary.

Having said that, all three co-authors have mentored early career researchers working in and on the global south, and we were already used to adapting research designs, research tools and sampling strategies and field sites to fit volatile contexts. This also involved developing multiple, flexible, context-sensitive and care-oriented contingency plans. For instance, when planning research projects and mentoring we took the following factors into account: frequent electricity or internet cuts, protests, attacks or socio-political violence putting those involved at risk or placing a too strenuous burden on research participants and team members. However, mentoring and planning research projects during a pandemic raised additional questions about long-term implications of any changes that were made during the pandemic for research projects. It required different considerations for planning, access, rapport-building and ethical implications in a rapidly evolving context marked by uncertainty and widespread anxieties and newly emerging and exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and inequalities. When we are not sure what is happening, how can we judge the scope and ramifications of the unfolding phenomenon? How is it possible to plan for the future? Even the most reflexive, context-sensitive and flexible planning requires us to build upon certain parameters that we can take as ‘given,’ ‘stable,’ ‘known,’ or ‘mapped out.’ We need a radar of sorts, even if taken with a critical pinch of salt, that provides certain ‘visibilities,’ or rather ‘cues.’¹¹

¹⁰ See England 1994; Rose 1997; Moser 2008.

¹¹ Batool et al. 2021.

Initially, we were primarily interested in practical aspects of planning and conducting research during a pandemic. However, the situation changed from September 2020 to 2022. By mid-2022, it almost seemed like the pandemic – as a public health emergency – had become an afterthought for many, especially when planning a research project (which changed again towards the end of 2022 with concerns over a new “wave” from / in East Asia). Nevertheless, we recognise that the pandemic has impacted our lives significantly in myriad, direct and indirect ways, and that we continue to discover and come to terms with its various ramifications. This is why it is imperative to consider how to account for the pandemic as we analyse data and write up our findings, a question that does not seem to receive sufficient attention. Furthermore, we need to explore how the pandemic affects knowledge production and academic practices more generally. Another necessity is to document how far the phenomena we study changed due to the pandemic, and to flag the new questions and issues that emerged. At the same time, we should not lose sight of other pressing issues. This begs the question: Does the pandemic constitute a radical turning point for research praxis which has been critiqued for a long time by decolonial, feminist scholars in particular (but not only)? As many have noted over the past two years, we should use this experience as a critical juncture to further decolonial and feminist debates, posing hard and uncomfortable questions about institutional structures and the politics of knowledge production which often fall through the cracks in our busy schedules or are side-lined by mainstream institutional practices and in our respective academic fields. Looking at these issues in late 2022, it seems that many of these urgent questions are no longer at the centre of discussion. With this contribution, we seek to keep them alive. So, what is at stake when calling for using this critical juncture to push for an alternative research praxis – or, in other words, a decentred, decolonial and feminist academic praxis?

Mapping the Terrain of Decolonial Academic Praxis – Insights and Guiding Lenses

Debates on a decolonial turn and subsequent demands for a concrete, alternative decolonial praxis and the critical scrutiny of universities as institutions with colonial legacies and continued coloniality in teaching, research, publishing and

hiring have become more pronounced in the past decade, but are far from new.¹² The emergence of these demands also led to a series of critiques that the ‘decolonial’ has become a buzzword or hype,¹³ in the words of Laclau, an ‘empty signifier, or, to borrow from Tuck and Yang, a ‘metaphor.’¹⁴ Others discuss whether decolonising can take place within universities’ existing institutional frameworks – a reform or transformation from within – or whether it requires a more radical response.¹⁵

The parameters required for a concrete decolonial research practice that decentres established ways of learning, sharing and producing knowledge are: (1) reflexivity, (2) critical awareness of positionality/-ies, (3) gaze, (4) inclusive, accountable and equity-oriented co-production/cooperation, and thus (5) relationality, along with (6) intersectional-conscious multiplicity plus diversity in terms of epistemological, methodological and research ethical practices.¹⁶

Raewyn Connell emphasises that any “decolonial or anti-colonial method is a practical activity” of knowledge production. Thus, it consists of the concrete acts “of the lives and situations of the people who do that work”¹⁷ – acts that are inherently relational and collective, done with and in the presence of many others, and contributing to various communities and lives across a number of fields and arenas, beyond the myopic concerns of academia.

In their radical critique, Tuck and Yang emphasise the notion of ‘unsettling’ as key to the decolonial endeavour. ‘Unsettling’ means working against imperial/settler-centred reconciliation, against erasure and the absorption of decoloniality to counter settler-colonial anxieties of guilt and haunting along with “moves to innocence.”¹⁸ They tell us that

[d]ecolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks. The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation. When we write about decolonization, we are not offering it as a metaphor; it is not an approximation of other experiences of oppression.

¹² Iroulo and Ortiz 2022; Connell 2021 and 2017; Bhambra et al. 2020; Mbembe 2016.

¹³ Moghli and Kadiwal 2021.

¹⁴ Tuck and Yang 2012.

¹⁵ See for instance Iroulo and Ortiz 2022; Moosavi 2022; Connell 2021; Bhambra et al. 2020; Mbembe 2016; Tuck and Yang 2014 and 2012.

¹⁶ See Iroulo and Ortiz 2022; Moosavi 2022; Barnett-Nagshineh and Pattathu 2021; Moghli and Kadiwal 2021; Abimbola 2019; Connell 2017; Mbembe 2016.

¹⁷ Connell 2021, 2.

¹⁸ Tuck and Yang 2012.

Decolonization is not a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. Decolonization doesn't have a synonym.¹⁹

Drawing on her book *The Good University*, Connell critically scrutinises different forms of academic labour and “workforces,”²⁰ the *modus operandi* of the global economy of knowledge, in order to carve out and visualise concrete “democratizing projects” of decentred, decolonial academic praxis. One building bloc is to dismantle the “deeply anti-democratic [academic/knowledge] economy,” centred on the global north, with regard to theorising and research methodologies, marked by “extraversion”²¹ and “academic dependency”²² as well as subsequent myopic knowledge productions.²³

Drawing from the seminal work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith and others, Connell writes that decolonial academic practices are linked to democratising knowledge productions.²⁴ Such academic labours are marked by a praxis of decentring – away from a hegemonic, (neo-)imperial centre (read: global north higher education institutions and a centred, hegemonic canon) – through “knowledge from below,” engaging with “new workforce[s]” as well as (re-)thinking methods, language(s) and theoretical lenses involved.²⁵ Such decentring requires a “logic of shifting the meaning of an existing technique” or rethinking a project in research ethical terms within the nexus of “data sovereignty” and concerns for reciprocity when engaging in statistical or census techniques or ethnographic methods, for example.²⁶ Decolonising the academy also requires us to review and revise acade-

19 Tuck and Yang 2012, 3.

20 Connell regards the following forms of academic labour as concrete processes and practices that require a decolonial decentring: (1) “consulting the archive” of existing knowledge produced and our engagement practices, (2) “processes of encounter, the work of engaging with,” (3) “pattering, the work of finding patterns in the material,” (4) “criticizing existing knowledge in the light of patterns (...) or the new encounters” and thus new knowledge evolving as well as (5) “broadcasting results.” All those labours are collective, co-produced in nature and relational, referring to existing bodies of knowledge and encounters made with a variety of “knowledge holders” that are not just academics but all those “knowledge holders” and “bearers of the archive” that our academic knowledge products tap into, people we encounter in this collective, social process. Connell 2021, 3–4.

21 Hountondji as quoted in Connell 2021, 8.

22 Alatas as quoted in Connell 2021, 8.

23 See Maldonado-Torres and his critique of the “idea of a method as a guarantor of truth and knowledge in the sciences” that needs to be transformed to counter epistemicides and epistemic colonisation enabled “by Western methodic knowledge.” Maldonado-Torres 2017, 89.

24 Smith 2021; Connell 2021, 9–11.

25 Connell 2021; Smith 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017.

26 Connell 2021, 9–12.

mic teaching practices and spaces, i.e., our classrooms, curricula and materials, guided by the “principle of curricular justice.”²⁷ But Connell inserts a caveat here: “I don’t think that the invention of canons is really a useful thing. What we need to do is widen the archive that we use, widen our knowledge of the history of knowledge production in whatever area that we are working on.”²⁸

There is much debate on how radical academic decolonisation should take place, what the process of deciding what knowledge(s) to include should look like. How to narrow gaps or address blind spots and decentre hegemonic knowledge archives and teaching practices, and determine what kind of spaces and encounters we need to create, are also key. This is sometimes difficult to establish and navigate across the global north-south divide and beyond, as our own pandemic-related experiences, elaborated in more concrete terms below, demonstrate. Barnett-Nagshineh and Pattathu understand the classroom as a key site, as “an intersectional and affective space, interwoven with the European project of empire.”²⁹ For them, these negotiations about academic decolonisation entail processes of learning and unlearning, marked by “deep awareness and care” and “creating alternative spaces that rethink what it means to be together and exist outside of a colonial and capitalist economic setting.”³⁰

Decolonizing should mean more than just how diverse a curriculum is, or what kind of canon is reproduced in any syllabus but recognize [sic] the ways in which the classroom and disciplines are a part of how the (economic and social) elements of a colonial global system is [sic] maintained and ongoing. The pervasive whiteness of syllabi globally and across disciplines is one way in which colonization never ended. Furthermore, there is an emotional resonance to this, hence demands for decolonization matter at a political and emotional level.³¹

Linda Tuhiwai Smith further highlights an ethics of practice for decolonial research praxis and unsettles concerns of positionality/-ies and responsibilities with the question who can become a principal investigator.³² In a decentring and transformative shift, Smith points out that such research “cannot be done without indigenous community participation,” without shifting power relations in order “to remove power from certain researchers, and certain research

²⁷ Connell 2017, 11.

²⁸ Connell 2021, 13.

²⁹ Barnett-Nagshineh and Pattathu 2021, 4.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Barnett-Nagshineh and Pattathu 2021, 2.

³² Smith 2021, 6.

methods and approaches, and [to] [...] transfer that power or redistribute power to other modes.”³³

In a recent webinar hosted by a British university in October 2022, Leon Moosavi cautioned listeners that we need to question whether all knowledge production and academic praxis necessarily needs to be decolonial. Or, in the words of Raewyn Connell: We have to carefully reflect on whether we “need to teach an epistemological doctrine to students” and break with hegemonically-centred “pyramid epistemologies,” moving towards concrete practices of “mosaic epistemology, where different knowledge formations are understood to sit alongside each other,” or “solidaristic epistemologies, where there is an attempt to connect and learn from different knowledge formations or different knowledge projects.”³⁴ Connell suggests concrete practices in research-based learning and teaching which are marked by linking and exchanging, which enable mutual learning along Bulbeck’s notion of “braiding the borders.”³⁵ This requires decentred spaces and approaches that may lead to “reshaping existing disciplines,” and demands a different way of teaching, dialogue, mentoring as well as of providing material support, i.e., funding and institutional resources and different materials.³⁶ Moosavi points out:

(...) it is rare for decolonial scholars to turn the decolonial gaze towards ourselves and interrogate our own positionality or scholarship in relation to coloniality (...). I call for ‘decolonial reflexivity,’ which involves decolonial scholars drawing upon theoretical discussions about academic decolonisation to introspectively locate the inadequacies, limitations, and contradictions within our own efforts and academic decolonisation, particularly in relation to the potential for us to inadvertently perpetuate coloniality rather than dismantle it.³⁷

We take a cue from the notion of “decolonial reflexivity”³⁸ when engaging our own experiences with and concerns about academic decolonisation as concrete academic praxis and auto-scrutiny – in terms of curriculum, teaching, research and other practices. We seek to employ the above-mentioned key parameters in our own academic doings, processes of learning and endeavours, to un-/re-learn and when we discuss the spotlights in the subsequent sections of this contribution.

³³ Smith 2021, 6; see also Tuck and Yang 2014.

³⁴ Connell 2021, 14.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Connell 2017, 11–12.

³⁷ Moosavi 2022, 2–3.

³⁸ Moosavi 2022.

In a first concrete step and practice, we interrogate our scopes of decentred, decolonial praxis – whether in terms of curricular or academic publishing concerns, or of epistemological, theoretical, methodological and research ethical knowledge archives and approaches. We also consider who is part of our academic encounter(s) and space(s), understood as “a mixture of people of different geographies, locations and experiences, that come with a range of lived experiences and cultural knowledges” and subsequent diverse positionalities “at complex intersections of power,” which “affects both the kinds of knowledge we seek to embrace and the ways in which we relate to our fieldwork and our classrooms.”³⁹ We strive to interrogate our conduct in pandemic times through the following spotlights as “a practice of conduct in operationalised terms,” what we enable or disable, how we engage with the existing gap between theory and practice of academic decolonisation.⁴⁰

Spotlight 1: Establishing a Protected Work and Mentoring Space

Given the challenges of many early career researchers in taking the first successful steps in academic writing and publishing, we suggested a collective writing process using vignettes as shorter pieces that each working group member would be able to handle, especially given the challenging situation in which most found themselves.⁴¹ These vignettes combine thick descriptions of particular situations with authors’ reflections on specific challenges. They map emerging questions and difficult decisions that we have had to take in times of uncertainty, unpredictability and high levels of anxiety that are marked by ambiguous and shifting rules and restrictions impacting our daily lives, academic encounters and research fields in manifold and diverging ways. The aim was for the vignettes to open a window for fellow research travellers, unveiling specific ground realities that are often messy, fuzzy and characterised by many colours and shades. They would document the everyday challenges of conducting research and producing knowledge. Quite often, such testimonies receive little attention in published research, which is primarily focused on the presentation and discussion of research findings, avoiding discussion of the vulnerabilities, ambivalences,

³⁹ Barnett-Nagshineh and Pattathu 2021, 8.

⁴⁰ Moghli and Kadiwal 2021, 4–6.

⁴¹ See Batool et al. 2021.

dilemmas, and difficult decisions that are part and parcel of our research practices.

When we have to navigate without an unequivocal compass and map, or when our readings are based on blurred sights and missing cues, how are these conditions reflected in our practices? An emerging body of work focused on pandemic research challenges offers no definitive prescriptions or signposts for how to cope with the effects of the pandemic; instead, its authors put forward mitigation strategies that have been developed and improvised, sometimes more and sometimes less successfully, during the pandemic, or in circumstances deemed similar enough to infer from.⁴² Serving as context-specific and grounded examples, the vignettes authored by the work-group members provided critical insights into decision-making procedures while flagging issues and topics that other researchers might have to address under conditions of uncertainty.

An overarching *agraffe* that framed our discussions is how to define ‘the field’ we worked in.⁴³ Where is ‘the field’ located, where are its boundaries and what are its specificities? Can we simply “take the field online”⁴⁴? An interrelated second theme was the challenges and possibilities of digital and remote research, especially if face-to-face data collection and interaction had previously been central to the research projects. What would be the implications of shifting to digital and hybrid approaches or to distance research? How do our frames of reference and possibilities of interpretation and interaction change when remote and digital approaches are employed?⁴⁵ How can researchers, especially those at early stages of their career, when networks are not yet well established and resources are limited, establish initial contacts and keep in touch with participants?⁴⁶ What does rapport-building look like under such conditions?⁴⁷ Moreover, what kinds of silences and exclusions does remote data-generation create, particularly when thinking about marginalised groups and existing as well as newly emerging vulnerabilities in pandemic times? Does remote research offer opportunities to transcend some of the limitations of face-to-face interactions, especially those

⁴² See Fleschenberg and Holz 2021.

⁴³ Our multivocal guest editorial team is aware of the multiple uses of the term ‘field,’ e.g., as a methodological expression or as a theoretical construct or a heuristic (as popularised by the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu). In this paper, we employ the term ‘field’ in the former sense.

⁴⁴ Haque 2021; Shah 2021; Kalia 2021.

⁴⁵ Khan 2021.

⁴⁶ Glattli 2021; Haque 2021; Pal 2021.

⁴⁷ Tareen 2021.

related to the positionalities of the researcher and participants?⁴⁸ A third theme pertained to risk, safety and power. ‘Do no harm’ is a well-established ethical principle that takes on additional meaning during a pandemic because it also raises questions about the transmission of infection, as well as entangled pandemic ramifications such as the compounding of vulnerability and inequality.⁴⁹ Lastly, remote and distance research are not new phenomena, particularly in volatile regions; scholars have routinely relied on ‘research assistants,’ a contested term as such in research ethics and research cooperation. As scholars like Mwambari et al. and Bisoka, among others, have noted, the safety of research assistants, as well as their substantial contribution to the success of research projects, has generally not received sufficient consideration and is part and parcel of power relations within research processes, heightened by the pandemic in particular ways.⁵⁰ In pandemic times, risk assessments for the work of research assistants and that of researchers become even more important. The significance of this question is extensively debated in the context of the power relations between a researcher in the global north or western academia and local co-researchers, located in the fragile institutional context of the global south.⁵¹ This is one of the difficulties highlighted in our working group, given also the diverse positionalities of its members.

A fourth theme that emerged was the mental and emotional well-being of researchers, research assistants and participants. Pandemic-related additional stressors emerged, and existing worries, for instance about delays in project completion, were heightened.⁵² Mental and emotional health, mentoring care and institutional support thus require further tending to, in particular for early-career researchers having to negotiate uncertainty, precarity and anxieties in often difficult circumstances and with limited resources and support networks at hand.

The themes that emerged from our working group discussions and writings are neither entirely novel nor unique, and have been written about. The onset of the pandemic has highlighted their significance, though. The discussions, as well as published reflections of many colleagues, show that it is necessary to engage with these questions more broadly and systematically, rather than reflecting on them as afterthoughts at the end of a chapter. A rereading of the existing body of work might provide fruitful insights, yet we also ask what kinds of reconfig-

⁴⁸ Khan 2021.

⁴⁹ Zuberi 2021; Batool 2021.

⁵⁰ See Mwambari et al. 2021 and Bisoka 2020.

⁵¹ Bisoka 2020; see Fleschenberg and Holz 2021.

⁵² Glattli 2021; Haque 2021; Tareen 2021; Shah 2021.

urations are necessary and possible in drafting decentred, critical and situated social-science research practices.

In addition, the working group as a platform for sharing helped us to process our experiences and to understand that we are not alone in our struggles. What the working group could not offer was the systematic training many working group members were searching for; our time was constrained by institutional structures and we did not have the necessary funding to invite trainers. We were only able to bookmark important general issues to consider while members pondered context-sensitive mitigation strategies individually.

On a larger scale, the pandemic has put many researchers in a paradoxical situation: While funders explicitly require applicants to develop innovative responses to altered conditions, institutionally, funding structures and ethical review procedures remain the same.⁵³

Given these institutional constraints and contradictions, another salient question that resurfaced throughout our discussions as well as in the literature was how to conduct research and produce knowledge differently within the structures in place. The second spotlight thus addresses the possibilities and challenges of slow science and the ethics of care as a key parameter; these are further linked to the third spotlight, which highlights the need for cooperation as a key parameter of a decentred, decolonial and feminist academic practice.

Spotlight 2: Slow Science and Decolonial-Feminist Ethics of Care

Experiences of feeling drained, of pandemic fatigue as well as adjustment of work and personal practices vis-à-vis anxieties and uncertainties were more commonly shared from 2021 onwards, while prominent calls for slow science and an ethics of care emerged within a pandemic “kaleidoscope in terms of change and patterns.”⁵⁴ Zahra Hussain argues that slow science “calls for unsettling the stable typologies drawn from structures of theory and knowledge we are trained in [...], in order to enter the unknown territories” in the “project of academic self-regulation.”⁵⁵ Similarly, Corbera et al. opine that “academic praxis should value forms of performance and productivity that enhance wellbeing and care together

⁵³ Vindrola-Padros 2021, 81–93; Nicholas 2020; Vindrola-Padros et al. 2020.

⁵⁴ Hussain 2020.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

with solidarity and pluralism.”⁵⁶ But how many of us were allowed to slow down, or had the resources and spaces to do so, to imagine and engage slowly, with care? What kinds of spaces of solidarity and (co)mentoring had opened up and been maintained over the past two pandemic years? Which structures and inequalities widened or became more entrenched?⁵⁷ What new vulnerabilities, risks and exposures emerged? Were institutional spaces, curricula and practices re-aligned with the need for slow science and ethics of care, or did this call wither away in the halls of academia once the first, second or third lockdown ended?⁵⁸ Do spaces exist that encourage researchers, students and those we co-research with to share their struggles and set collective goals that are aligned with different needs?⁵⁹ How do we deal with a longing for ‘back to normal’ or a post-pandemic ‘new normal’ in the social sciences?⁶⁰ Lastly, Dunia et al. remind us that a re-orientation and the setting of new standards are not only necessary on the institutional level but are also essential if we mean to incorporate solidarity and decoloniality into our individual practices and decision-making.⁶¹

Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma and Chika Watanabe present us with an interesting proposal in their *Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography*.⁶² They invite us to probe taken-for-granted notions of field and home, footprints and scope of fieldwork practices – not only given that a “return to ‘normal’” might never be possible (or, we add here, may in itself be fundamentally problematic). Taking a decolonial and feminist approach, they call for us to carefully dismantle the black box of the personal-political-professional nexus of knowledge production and innovate “methods and epistemologies to contend with intimate, personal, political, and material concerns” embedded in complex knowledge-production processes. This includes the need to reconceptualise notions of ‘going’ and ‘travelling,’ the ‘field,’ modes of ‘being there’ and maintaining research relationships, new modes of data collection as well as “rethink[ing the] *temporalization* of data collection and analysis.”⁶³ In other words, to “refigure what counts as knowledge and what does not, what counts as research and what does not, and how we can transform reali-

⁵⁶ Corbera et al. 2020, 192.

⁵⁷ Harle 2020; Young 2020.

⁵⁸ De Gruyter 2020; Smith and Watchom 2020.

⁵⁹ Corbera et al. 2020; Das 2020.

⁶⁰ Fadaak et al. 2020.

⁶¹ Dunia et al. 2020; see also Martin 2021.

⁶² Günel, Varma and Watanabe 2020.

⁶³ Ibid.

ties that have been described to us as ‘limitations’ and ‘constraints’ into openings for new insights.”⁶⁴

In this context, the collection and analysis of data is a central point of concern. Thus, re-iterating a longstanding decolonial and feminist concern, we call for cooperative research practices.

Spotlight 3: A Plea for Decolonizing Research Collaborations Across and Beyond the Global North-South Divide

Developing modalities of cooperation that avoid extractive data collection, minimise risk for all partners, enable the co-learning and co-production of knowledge, and ensure that the work of all contributors is valued must be done in a sustained, decentred way. It requires rethinking research networks and supervision teams and reviewing bureaucratic procedures, especially those related to budgeting, that place restrictions on how funds are spent.

Linked to questions of positionality and reflexivity and the affective dimensions of ‘field’ and knowledge production are the dynamic power relations between the researcher and already-employed or potential research assistants. The reflections of our vignette authors,⁶⁵ mostly positioned as indigenous outsiders, allow us to go beyond the exploitative relation between the global north researcher and the global south research assistant(s) while remaining conscious of the existing privileges of indigenous outsiders in terms of education, resources, class etc. In line with the concerns of some global south researchers employed in Western academia, the local positionalities of our working group members and writers’ collective demonstrate not only greater sensitivity to the tribulations of using the bodies of research assistants as an instrument in the neoliberal academic machine, they also reinforce the need for empathy and mutual respect, and demonstrate the growing sense of resentment to epistemic and economic violence in the interest of vigorous knowledge production.⁶⁶

Vigorous knowledge production is not possible if relationships between researcher(s) and research assistants are characterised by negative or unevenly

⁶⁴ Günel, Varma and Watanabe 2020; see also Fleschenberg and Castillo 2022.

⁶⁵ Batool et al. 2021.

⁶⁶ See also Baczko and Dorronsoro 2020; Bisoka 2020; Dunia et al. 2020.

balanced reciprocal relations. Instead, reducing the negative effects of asymmetrical power relations between the researchers and their assistants requires paying attention to the political, cultural, and emotional context in which a research field is located. Researchers must continuously and reflexively challenge their own positionality in terms of privilege (due to socioeconomic status or educational qualification/affiliation, for instance) or power (assuming authority over research design, making decision about methods and the field, analysis of data and dissemination of findings, etc.). We need to cultivate a research ethics based on principles of (com)passion, care and mutuality, and the ability to listen to and work with and alongside diverse fellow travellers. The need for genuine cooperation and coproduction of knowledges⁶⁷ is even more important under pandemic circumstances, which widen and compound structures of inequality (in intersectional terms), vulnerability and injustice.

Academic collaboration entails acknowledging and countering inequalities between partners, because cooperation between global north and global south institutions cannot and does not play out on a level playing field. While it is possible to alleviate some of these (e.g., those related to how knowledge is produced), inequalities related to resources and institutional structures are not easy to overcome. An understanding of the specific circumstances and contexts of all knowledge-production partners is a precondition for meaningful collaboration.⁶⁸ Eloisa Martin notes that, due to discomfort surrounding the topic, access to money and funding, while one of the most important aspects of equitable collaboration, is the least discussed, (others include prestige, field expertise, geographic location, gender and race relations).⁶⁹ However, if funding partners in the global north are also working under precarious conditions because of short-term and part-time contracts, how can they build sustainable and long-term partnerships? How can we justify reproducing precarious labour conditions in global south contexts?

To respond to these questions, embodied reflexivity in relation to the aesthetics of power between researchers in the north and researchers (often, assistants) in the south is fundamental (but largely missing) to appreciating epistemic energies in the field, ethical responsibilities and decolonial praxis. Among other things, the Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us of local researchers' fundamental role as team members,⁷⁰ as well as, equally, their omission from any claims to

⁶⁷ See also Baczko and Dorronsoro 2020; Bisoka 2020; Corbera 2020; Dunia et al. 2020.

⁶⁸ Martin 2021; DeHart 2020; Gerlach et al. 2020.

⁶⁹ Martin 2021.

⁷⁰ Khan 2021. Local researchers operate as 'brokers,' 'fixers,' 'assistants,' 'research affiliates,' or

knowledge production.⁷¹ A call for transparency in this regard has raised some difficult-to-answer questions. Among others: How to negotiate cross-country or cross-continental institutional incongruences while adhering to an ethics of care, respect and responsibility; How to reduce inequality in such research collaborations? Do responsibilities of the researchers in western academia towards local research team members in the global south not extend beyond the institutional and procedural definitions of care and personal needs of acting out of good conscience? What role does gendered positionality of research assistants play in overall risk-assessment designs, and where do procedural ethics fail?

Some of our working group members often pointed to the discomfort they felt during their interactions in their native localities as their ‘field,’ and their inability to avoid the indifference of locals to western-based or nationally imposed Covid-19 protocols.⁷² During our working group discussions, we noticed that even when local travel and gathering restrictions are relaxed, but with health-safety guidance for meeting in public spaces in place, this might produce an inherent bias against women researchers in gender-segregated communities. For instance, interviews with women can mostly only take place in closed spaces such as homes, offices and educational institutions, where it is hard to observe distancing measures and other safety protocols. The gendered implications of standardised Covid-19 prevention guidance for researchers, and the absence of methodological reflections in the post-covid research methods literature, point towards a promising research avenue with the potential of unsettling these aesthetics of power.

In decolonial terms, a reflexive engagement with relational dynamics between researchers from the global north and local colleagues in the south is a way forward. Some key starting points for this reflexive engagement are: How are risk-assessment rules and principles equally applied, not procedurally but practically, and where has this equality been overlooked and why? Are gender biases and their associated contextual limitations given enough consideration in the design and implementation of research? What tensions emerge between procedural ethics and researchers’ personal commitments to ethics of care, responsibility and transparency? What implications do these tensions have for research design, relying on local partners? How can research experience, as an embodied

‘collaborators’ (Mwambari et al. 2021; Mwambari 2019; Utas 2019). While coordinating a research project from the UK which was being implemented in Pakistan, Salman Khan’s concrete pandemic-related practice of an ethics of care towards team members included, for example, the provision of safe travel for each field visit, working from home at the intensification of a pandemic ‘wave,’ and pre-initiating contacts for local research team members. For details see Khan 2021.

⁷¹ Bisoka 2020.

⁷² Batool et al. 2021; Zuberi 2021.

and affective mode of lived reflexivity, contribute to solidarities against unequal research relationships marked by asymmetrical financial arrangements, hiring and working conditions of local research team members as well as global north-centred universalising (yet to be provincialised) behaviours in (post)pandemic research projects? These guiding questions are central, yet largely understudied, aspects of decolonised knowledge production.

Speaking Back to the Literature – The Digital Turn in the Social Sciences? Issues of Remote Embeddedness and Altered Research Practices

It has become clear that the pandemic has reshaped research phenomena, vocabularies, spaces, tools, relationships and interactions. The extent and the forms and shapes of these reconfigurations remains to be seen. In order to re-calibrate research practices, not only but especially when entangled with pandemic-related (re)productions of inequalities, silences and emergencies, we require an “additional layer of reflexivity,” because “[i]f methods shape how and what we know and are always political... what kind of social realities do we want to create or bring into being?”⁷³ Digital research methods and concerns about navigating research ethics in such contexts are not novel as such.⁷⁴ However, the scope, intensity and scale of a potential digital turn in academia was new when the pandemic hit. In 2020, we were trying to “rethink how many academic practices might take place in virtual environments,”⁷⁵ such as webinars and online conferences, digital research collaborations in multi-sited research teams, or how social media can be used for “the democratization of academic knowledge.”⁷⁶ The pandemic has also highlighted that many ‘traditional’ criteria for ‘good’ fieldwork practices and valid data, such as the need for long-term immersion, require re-consideration. It appears that a digital turn in academic practices and encounters might allow us to bridge financial constraints and time management challenges as well as concerns about sustainability. As we have seen over the course of the pandemic, these promises and opportunities have to be taken with a grain of salt. Among

⁷³ Chowdhury et al. 2020.

⁷⁴ Howell 2021; Tiidenberg 2020; see further Chung et al. 2020; Roberts 2015.

⁷⁵ Carrigan 2020.

⁷⁶ Das and Ahmed 2020.

other aspects, digital and work-from-home scholarship exposes us to a new work-life balance and presents new research-related ethical challenges.

While revising this contribution in late 2022, a reflection on calls and opportunities made at the beginning of the pandemic brings us to conclude that the high hopes seem somewhat dampened. Many of the discussions that gained momentum in 2020 seem to have come to a standstill. Some of the spaces that opened seem to have closed down again, and many of the debates have receded to specialised discussion forums.

One opportunity the pandemic provided was – and still is – to scrutinise the research methods we employ. The travel restrictions, lock-downs, hygiene and social distancing restrictions required researchers whose research activities involve travel and interactions with people to re-think the modes and modalities of knowledge production. The initial, almost default, reaction of many scholars was to enter the ‘field’ through digital and online tools. For many, this meant breaking new ground and soon the realisation hit that a shift from ‘offline’ to ‘online’ research is neither easy nor simple but requires the acquisition of a number of skills and sensitivities that are not intuitive. Scholars who employ digital, rapid, participatory or action research approaches have long struggled with preconceived notions within mainstream debates about online research not measuring up to the gold standard of face-to-face interactions and fieldwork in the physical realm.⁷⁷ The sudden focus on the digital sphere highlighted the relevance of their work and insights. Was everyone suddenly doing online and digital research? In many instances, rather than talking about online research, it might be more appropriate to talk about how scholars entered the ‘field’ via digital means and online tools.

It became apparent that navigating the digital sphere and using online tools requires obtaining new skills.⁷⁸ Various authors and members of our working group noted that they did not know where or to whom to turn to for such training. Few trainings were offered because research institutions generally did not sufficiently acknowledge the gravity of these shifts, and/or because very few people had the relevant skills.⁷⁹ Additionally, during the first few months of the pandemic, no one was sure for how long digitally-mediated and distanced research would persist. This is why scholars as well as institutions were uncertain how much time and resources to invest in skill trainings or technological upgrades. Another issue that received very little attention is the impact of digital and online

⁷⁷ Góral ska 2020; Howlett 2021.

⁷⁸ Góral ska 2020.

⁷⁹ Tareen 2021; Haque 2021; Pal 2021; Christia et al. 2020.

data collection on data analysis and findings. To what extent does the digital and online world constitute a separate ‘field’ from the physical world, and how are they connected?⁸⁰ Is data collected online a substitute for or an addition to already existing data? In what ways would the data require different techniques of analysis and ethics protocols?⁸¹ To what degree should and does the pandemic and its effects figure in research results and findings?

Another opportunity presented by online research is and was easy access to a wider range of people and data. Various scholars caution that digital spaces are “porously bounded, political and power laden.”⁸² It is therefore important to consider silences and absences as well as new forms of inequality resulting from online research and digital scholarship, for both research participants, local co-researchers and researchers themselves. For instance, while digital data provides opportunities for open-access data-sharing,⁸³ what is often not part of the conversation is who collects the timely data and under what kinds of conditions (We addressed the precarious situation of research team members based in global south contexts in the previous section). A related ethical challenge emerging from the rapid expansion of digital and online data collection is to ensure that data is not just extracted from global south contexts without clarifying ownership. Such practices perpetuate dependencies and existing inequalities in the form of data- and techno-colonialism.⁸⁴ Other issues to consider are the traceability of data and informed consent, governmental surveillance technologies of online spaces or hacking of cloud-based collaboration platforms and ambiguous or missing legal frameworks regarding privacy rights and data protection.⁸⁵ In this context, accountability and the transparency of processes and storage solutions are of utmost importance. Most of the data is stored on servers or in clouds that are hosted in the global north. The archives and databases are often only accessible to members of the host university. If sharing options are available, the interfaces for partners who are not based at the host university are often difficult to access and navigate, and the functionality of the platforms is restricted. This was a significant impediment to our collaborative efforts because partners are not on the same technological footing. Funding guidelines appear to move away from equipment and technology-based support, prioritising intellectual and creative

80 Haque 2021; Pulker 2021; Suarez 2023.

81 Gummer et al. 2020; Uprichard and Carrigan 2015.

82 Morrow et al. 2015, 526, 537; Howlett 2021; Górlaska 2020.

83 Guiterrez and Li 2020; Tabasso 2020.

84 Madianou 2019; Chung, Xu and Zhang 2020; Dahmm and Moultrie 2021.

85 See Hantrais et al. 2021; Chowdhry et al. 2020; Madianou 2019; Tabasso 2020.

outputs such as reports, podcasts or art. This increases the dependency of global south scholars on their global north partners in terms of technology.

Our informal conversations with colleagues about digital research practices also point to a different set of limitations and side effects. The pandemic has highlighted the need for safe spaces to voice concerns and discuss what we are working on. Often, these safe spaces emerge during informal conversations and encounters, which must remain a priority. Online interactions can be such safe spaces, but they need to be planned ahead, which adds a layer of formality. Furthermore, going digital is not a feasible or suitable option for all researchers and research projects, and hard-to-reach communities are often even harder to reach.⁸⁶ Looking towards the future, this means it is important to think creatively about fieldwork practices and research designs. For instance, to consider participatory and community-based research approaches,⁸⁷ art-based approaches,⁸⁸ or “patchwork ethnographies,”⁸⁹ piecing together various types of often fragmented data from multiple sources collected through repeated short-term visits and employing a triangulated yet decentred approach for data sources, investigators, methods and ethics of care. We should pay attention to “what forms of knowledge and methodologies emerge *in* and *through* researchers’ life and work commitments.”⁹⁰ Silences and emergencies that were newly configured or compounded due to the pandemic require particular attention in discussions about decolonial academic praxis and academic collaboration.

These were some of the issues that emerged during our working group meetings; they were discussed from interdisciplinary, transregional perspectives as part of a summer term 2022 master class-cum-hybrid lecture series “Digital Research Methods in (Post-)Pandemic Times,” co-coordinated by Andrea Fleschenberg and Salman Khan at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. The course largely centred on the experiences and concerns of early career researchers and provided a protected space for exchange and mentoring as well as critical engagement with existing and newly emerging academic debates and state of the art.

Turning the gaze to ourselves, the co-authors of this article, we were not able to maintain the initial level of exchange and interaction among our working group members. As the months progressed and lockdowns were ended, all working group members got busy with ‘catching-up’ with the work the lockdowns

⁸⁶ Tareen 2021; Zuberi 2021.

⁸⁷ Hall et al. 2021; Mitlin et al. 2020.

⁸⁸ Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2020.

⁸⁹ Günel, Varma and Watanabe 2020.

⁹⁰ Günel, Varma and Watanabe 2020; Käihkö 2020; Nicholas 2020; Selim 2020.

had disrupted, and we were consumed with settling back into our old/new lives. Soon we were tied down by routine tasks that came with a return to presence-based teaching and work. We were aware of fallout from the pandemic which manifested itself in many small ways in our professional and private lives. We felt that our lives had been altered by living through the pandemic, however, we did not take time to note and collectively reflect on the content, quality and significance of these changes. Our aim to slow down and offer each other support and safe spaces to vent our fears and difficulties was held up in spirit and in sporadic chats, emails and voice notes, but not in the systematic manner that we had managed to establish in 2020 and 2021.

As of 2022, it appears that many of the debates that were ‘hot’ during the first two years of the pandemic have largely withered away. This also causes frustration. We note an increase in publications on digital research methods and the effects of the pandemic; more courses focussing on digital research methods and online research are being offered. On the institutional level, however, there appears to be little systematic engagement with what we can learn from the past few years.⁹¹ While a number of publications on the pandemic’s impact on health and various social issues have been published, social scientists have not turned their gaze on themselves. A few large-scale studies show that the pandemic has widened the gender gap,⁹² but the pandemic’s impact on existing inequalities within academia requires more attention if we want to decolonise knowledge production.⁹³ To move ahead and learn, we also need more reflection on our everyday practices during the pandemic and our experiences with ‘moving back’ to presence-based work.⁹⁴

Concluding Thoughts

Our practical (in the working group and seminars) and theoretical engagement with key research issues such as how to define the ‘field,’ the challenges of digital and remote research, how to deploy a decolonial-feminist ethics of care towards everyone involved in academic knowledge production, and power dynamics operating within research relationships, bridge the pre- and post-pandemic debates

⁹¹ KNAW 2022.

⁹² Madgavkar et al. 2020; Alon et al. 2020; Flor et al. 2022.

⁹³ Deryugina et al. 2021; Dönmez 2022; Herman 2021; Myers 2020; Higginbotham and Dahlberg 2021.

⁹⁴ Banerjee 2021; Batool et al. 2021; Nikolić 2021.

related to offline, online and hybrid research designs. Dealing with and thinking about intertwined structural, relational, procedural (formal), ethical and emotional challenges underpinning any research design in uncertain times enabled us to reflect upon research designs (offline and online) and their procedural dimensions, institutional frameworks (including procedural guidelines, financial arrangements and support structures), and key challenges in knowledge production. Although our positionalities (those of this chapter's co-authors and of the members of the working group) are diverse and instructive in their own ways, our endeavour has opened up a space for reflection, deliberation and dialogue with academics whose perspectives are not covered in this chapter. For instance, scholars in the global south with no current and past affiliations to universities and institutions in the global north faced these challenges in addition to those created by exclusion and structural inequalities within the global knowledge production system.⁹⁵

Our reflexive engagement with research during and beyond pandemic times raises many significant questions for critical, decentred, and context-sensitive knowledge production related to South Asia and the global south more generally.⁹⁶ Can gendered research geographies and resource-scarce regions be entered (as fields) through digital and remote research methods with a decolonial academic praxis and an ethics of care? Is now a time for questioning (and where possible disobeying), with ever greater intensity, existing procedural ethics frameworks and institutional support structures in place in the global north, and to demand more democratic governance of knowledge production? What emotional strain and constraints do online methods impose upon researchers in western academia (whether from the global south or north) by limiting their capacities to capture epistemic energies “out there” in the contexts that are researched? For a decolonised knowledge production praxis, structural, economic and epistemic violence needs to be challenged. What concrete academic practices – be it in terms of teaching, researching and cooperating – can genuinely and sustainably contribute to this goal beyond purchasing the rhetoric? We leave our readers with these questions, hoping that a more critical reflexive engagement with these issues will result in a response. If it happens, we will consider that this chapter, in which we have shared our pandemic-related experiences, struggles and attempts of cooperation as well as resistance, has served its purpose: to contribute a small

⁹⁵ We thank Fathima Nizaruddin for highlighting this aspect.

⁹⁶ See the special issue “Negotiating Research Ethics in Volatile Contexts,” co-guest-edited by Abida Bano, Rosa Cordillera A. Castillo, Sarah Holz and Andrea Fleschenberg 2022/2023.

piece to a continuous, challenging and yet-to-be amplified debate as well as concrete praxis of decolonial reflexivity and alternative academic praxis.

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